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Conviviality with and without caution: Variations in situational norms on drinking by consumption level and demography in Australia, 2021

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Abstract

Background: Drinking alcoholic beverages together is a powerful symbol and instrument of conviviality. But alcohol consumption also risks subsequent injury or harm. Deciding to drink in social situations thus involves balancing convivial gains against potential risks. This paper studies the balancing of conviviality with caution by Australian adults in their views on situational norms on drinking.

Methods: In 2021, 2,574 Australian adults were asked whether and how much drinking was "OK" in eleven social situations of everyday life, mostly involving conviviality, but varying in how much the situation or its aftermath implied drinking limits. The structure of responses was factor analysed, and regression analyses studied how answers on drinking norms related to respondents' own drinking, demographics and social position.

Results: An exploratory factor analysis found three factors: (a) five situations where conviviality was primary; (b) four situations where there were clear reasons for limiting the drinking; and (c) a weaker factor dominated by situations without conviviality or which transitioned to sobriety. Responses on situations emphasising conviviality thus tended to cluster, as did responses on situations involving both conviviality and caution. Respondents who on occasion drink heavily generally reported higher drinking norms for all situations. Those with a higher household income, who were younger than 35, who were not living with a partner, and who were current drinkers, were more likely to support drinking in the first factor's "conviviality" situations. Women were less likely to support drinking in "with caution" situations, while those with higher household incomes and who were self-employed were more likely to support drinking in those situations.

Conclusion: Australian drinking norms differ by situation, with caution limiting convivial drinking when required by the situation or its aftermath. Differences in normative views vary somewhat by whether and how much a respondent drinks.

Introduction

In many societies, alcoholic drinks have strong positive social functions, primarily as a symbol and enactment of commensality (Gefou-Madianou, 1992) – the practice of eating and drinking together, as an enactment of peaceful coexistence (Dictionary.com, 2026). Getting together for a drink, paying for one another's drinks, raising one's glasses together in a toast – these are symbolic actions of communality and conviviality. But in a complex society, these traditions of drinking together may be more positively valued by some groups in the society – groupings which sociologists have described as "social worlds of heavy drinking" (MacLean et al., 2021; Room et al., 2022).

Even in such social worlds, the acceptability of drinking alcoholic beverages, and indeed expectations that the drinker will become intoxicated, vary between social situations, so that for situations like a parent spending time with small children or when about to drive a car there is a fair consensus in many societies that this is a "dryer" situation in which no or little drinking is most appropriate, while situations like a party at someone else's house or when out at a tavern with friends are "wetter", in that a substantial proportion of the

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population will say that it is "OK" to drink enough to feel the effects (Room et al., 2019). The norms against drinking in "dryer" situations reflect that drinking can interfere with the drinker's attention, physical coordination, and thinking and reasoning. Drinking is thus potentially a source of substantial harm to the health and welfare, not only of the person drinking but of others around.

This duality means that, in societies where alcohol is widely used, drinking is subject to social norms for a social situation about whether there will be any drinking, and if so within what limits. The norms are influenced by the nature of the social situation and what will follow it. In many situations, at least to those enmeshed in a social world of heavy drinking, conviviality will suggest drinking, but aspects of the situation or of what comes after it will suggest caution about whether or how much drinking.

General population studies in the US began to explore situational norms on drinking in the 1960s (Hilton, 1987), and questions like those in the present study were being asked by the end of the 1970s (Greenfield & Room, 1997). The questions were adapted for use in the cross-national GENACIS project (Wilsnack et al., 2009), allowing a comparative analysis of norms in nine situations in 12 diverse societies, including Australia. While there was substantial variation across cultures in the responses, a general differentiation could be found between what could be described as "dryer" and "wetter" situations, with greater unanimity about not drinking in "dryer" situations, both between societies and between heavier drinkers and abstainers within a society. Australia was among the countries with a greater acceptance of drinking enough to feel the effects in "wetter" situations (Room et al., 2019; Room, 2020).

This paper returns to the issue of situational drinking norms in a given society, Australia, drawing on a 2021 general-population national survey of adults. We study the interrelationships of responses to questions about drinking norms in 11 situations, looking for what situations have in common that on the one hand drives, acceptance of relatively heavy drinking in the situation, and on the other hand, drives rejection of drinking, and particularly of drinking enough to feel the effects. The situations asked about are all situations that might involve some drinking, and for some there will often be an expectation of drinking, as an expression of community and conviviality. But the problems and harms associated with drinking are always a countering factor, and this aspect of drinking behaviour is present to a greater or lesser extent in the situation and its aftermath. In our analysis, we examine for the first time the patterning of responses for the different situations with a factor analysis; to see how general-population responses differentiate between situations in the amount of drinking allowed and expected, and whether there is a clustering of responses in terms of what have been termed "wetter" versus "dryer" situations.

Besides exploring the patterning of responses concerning drinking in different situations, we also explore the distribution of responses in the population by pattern of drinking and by demography and social location. In this way, we can begin to characterise the sociodemographic location in the society of those in social worlds of heavy drinking.

Materials and Methods

Sample and procedure

The study was approved by the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC20518). Data used in this analysis were collected in November and early December 2021 by the Survey Research Centre (SRC) for the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research's studies of Alcohol's Harm to Others (Laslett et al., 2023; Rintala et al., 2023). The sample combines two components, both aiming at a representative sample of Australian adults: (a) a random-digit-dialling (RDD) sample of Australian mobile phone numbers (n = 1000); and (b) a survey sample drawn from SRC's Life in Australia™ (LinA) survey panel (n = 1574; Kaczmirek et al., 2019; Rintala et al., 2023). The LinA Survey is a probability-based panel recruited using dual-frame (land-line and mobile phone) and random digit dialling that has continued to recruit participants over time using multiple methods. While the computed final response rate for each sample, compared to their initial sampling, is low (5.5% for the RDD sample, 6.1% for the LinA sample), the weighting of the samples renders them fairly representative of the Australian adult population.

Of the 2,574 participants who completed the survey, 2,466 (95.8%) participants provided responses to all 11 situational norm items; this is the sample that is used in the current study. Its demographic composition is shown in Table 1. The Survey Research Centre also prepared a weighted version of the combined sample with the same total n as the unweighted sample (also shown in Table 1), weighted to be representative of the Australian adult population, and found few differences in results when analyses in the weighted and unweighted samples were compared. For a detailed description of the weighting procedures, including comparisons of the unweighted and weighted samples with Australian population benchmarks, see Rintala et al. (2023). After weighting, all key demographic variables fell within their target benchmark ranges. In this paper, we use that weighted data for Table 3 below, since it is reporting rates for the population as a whole. But since the other analyses here are of relationships between variables, the unweighted data is used for them.

Measures of situational drinking norms

In the drinking norms questions, respondents were asked whether and how much drinking was "OK" in each of eleven situations, and for each situation were asked to choose between four alternatives for "how much a person in that situation should feel free to drink; how much drinking is alright?". The alternative answers were: *no drinking*; *1 or 2 drinks*; *enough to feel the effects, but not drunk*; and *getting drunk is sometimes alright*. In our analyses in this paper, these responses are treated as a numeric scale, ranging from *no drinking* scored as 1 to *getting drunk is sometimes alright*

scored as 4. The situations are listed in Table 2, in the order in which they were asked.

Table 1

Demographic composition of respondents to situational norms items

	Unweighted *n* (%)	Weighted %
Gender		
Men	1,126 (46.05)	49.28
Women	1,319 (53.95)	50.72
Age group		
18-34	522 (21.19)	31.08
35-64	1,256 (50.97)	48.25
65+	686 (27.84)	20.67
Household composition		
Lives alone	518 (21.10)	13.79
Not partnered, with children	173 (7.05)	8.10
Partnered, no children	906 (36.90)	35.57
Partner, with children	533 (21.71)	25.19
No partner or child, but lives with other adults[a]	325 (13.24)	17.36
Education		
< High school completion	189 (7.70)	9.23
High school +	1,073 (43.69)	62.69
Bachelor degree +	1,194 (48.62)	28.08
Employment		
Any other	1,020 (41.53)	38.52
Self-employed	243 (9.89)	9.86
Paid employment	1,193 (48.57)	51.63
Household income		
< $45,000	468 (18.98)	18.12
$45-$64,999	214 (8.68)	8.24
$65-$99,999	355 (14.40)	15.31
$100-$149,999	374 (15.17)	14.65
$150,000+	533 (21.61)	20.88
Income not reported	522 (21.17)	22.81

[a] Other adults, e.g., housemates, adult relatives

Other measures

Household composition was derived from questions about whom participants lived with. Participants reported whether any other adults lived in the home, the relationship of each co-resident (e.g., partner, parent, sibling, other relative, friend/housemate), and the number of children aged 0–12 and 13–17 years living in the household. These variables were combined to classify respondents into one of five mutually exclusive household types: living alone; not partnered but with children; partnered without children; partnered with children; or not partnered without children but living with other adults. Age, gender, education status, employment status, household income, risky drinking frequency, and number of drinks typically consumed were also included. For more information on the survey measures, refer to Appendix A of Rintala et al. (2023).

Analyses

The paper includes an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of answers on the eleven situations (Table 3 and Figure 1), to study relations between answers on the different situations, and check the differentiation in previous analyses in terms of "wetter" and "dryer" situations. The EFA was undertaken in R (version 4.2.2) using the "psych" package (Revelle, 2025). Following Watkins' (2018) recommendation for best practice, Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test were conducted to ensure that the items were factorable and that EFA was appropriate. Subsequently, parallel analysis using the R package "paran" was conducted to ascertain the factor structure of the 11 situational norm items. A range of extraction methods were assessed, including maximum likelihood, principal axis factoring and minimum residual. Based on the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), principal axis factoring was selected. Due to the presence of skew and kurtosis, as well as the ordinal nature of the items, polychoric correlations were used in the factor analysis. Finally, oblimin rotation was deemed most appropriate, given the expectation that each of the factors would be correlated.

This paper proceeds to explore how the study sample varies in relation to the two main factors identified in the factor analysis. The relationship to the respondent's own drinking pattern is examined, and the variation by demographics and social location. These explorations use bivariate and multivariate linear regressions.

Results

Drinking norms for diverse situations

Table 2 shows the weighted prevalence of each of the 11 situational norm items, among the 2,466 respondents answering all of them. In general, responses were closer to unanimity about non-drinking situations than about occasions when it was acceptable to become intoxicated. However, there is substantial variation between items in distributions on how much drinking is seen as appropriate. For three of the situations (i, f and j), two-thirds or more of respondents answered, "no drinking" and mean item scores were low (mean range = 1.2–1.4), while for four situations (d, c, g and a) less than 7% gave this response and mean item scores were higher (mean range = 2.3–2.8). Conversely, less than 1% thought "getting drunk" was sometimes all right for four items (i, j, b and f), for three items (g, d and a) at least 19% thought this was sometimes acceptable, and more than one-half thought it was acceptable in two situations (d and a) to drink at least enough to feel the effects.

Exploratory factor analysis

Exploring the relationships between respondents' answers concerning the different situations, the eleven items were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis. The result of Bartlett's test of sphericity demonstrated that the correlation matrix between the items was non-random ($\chi^2(55) = 10{,}344$, $p < .001$), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test statistic indicated

overall adequacy for factor analysis (KMO = 0.92). Subsequently, Horn's parallel analysis for 5,000 iterations suggested the appropriateness of a 3-factor solution. The results of the minimum average partial (MAP) test indicated a 2-factor solution, and as such, both were evaluated. However, after subsequent testing – by comparing RMSEA, BIC, and TLI, the 3-factor solution was deemed most appropriate, and is shown in Table 3 and Figure 1.

Table 2

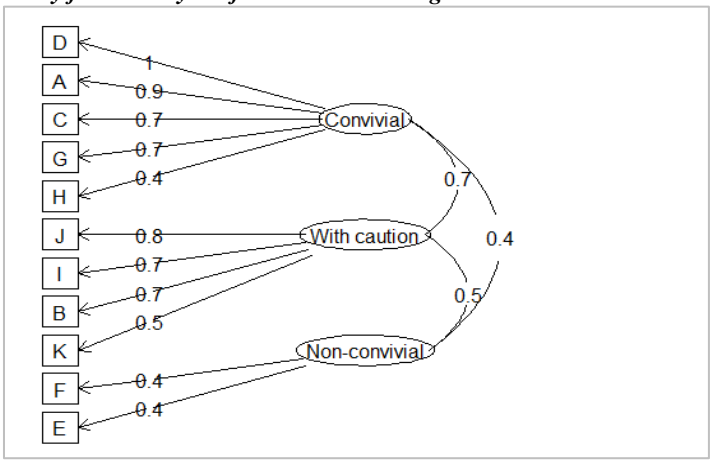
Responses of Australian adults on situational drinking norms, 2021

"I'll describe situations that people sometimes find themselves in. For each one, please tell me how much a person in that situation should feel free to drink. How much drinking is all right? Would you say…."		% … no drinking	% … 1 or 2 drinks	% … enough to feel the effects, but not drunk	% … getting drunk is sometimes all right	Mean item score (SD)
(a)	At a party, at someone else's home	6.6	37.2	36.1	20.2	2.71 (0.83)
(b)	As a parent, spending time with small children	48.5	44.5	6.2	0.8	1.60 (0.63)
(c)	For a couple having dinner out together	5.5	64.3	23.5	6.6	2.33 (0.66)
(d)	Out at a bar/pub having drinks with friends	3.3	36.3	39.2	21.2	2.75 (0.80)
(e)	At home on a weekday night	28.8	53.2	11.3	6.7	1.93 (0.77)
(f)	For a couple of coworkers out to lunch (on a work day)	68.7	29.0	1.6	0.8	1.32 (0.53)
(g)	When with friends at home	6.4	45.5	28.8	19.4	2.60 (0.83)
(h)	When getting together with friends after work before going home	21.6	61.8	11.3	5.3	2.01 (0.70)
(i)	When going to drive a car	79.1	20.3	0.3	0.2	1.24 (0.44)
(j)	For adults attending a young child's birthday party at someone else's home	66.8	31.3	1.7	0.3	1.35 (0.52)
(k)	With friends in a public place (beach, park, street)	51.8	39.3	7.5	1.4	1.61 (0.69)

n = 2,466. All results presented are on weighted data

Figure 1

Diagram of results of exploratory factor analysis of situational drinking norms



Note: Based on the analysis shown in Table 3 below. Each letter indicates the item with that letter in Table 2 above.

Table 3

Exploratory factor analysis of the 11 situational norms items

	Factor 1: Convivial	Factor 2: With caution	Factor 3: Non-convivial	h^2
Strength of factor (Eigenvalue)	3.41	2.49	0.84	-
(d) Out at a bar/pub having drinks with friends	**0.98**	-0.05	-0.05	0.15
(a) At a party, at someone else's home	**0.87**	0.08	0.10	0.23
(c) For a couple having dinner out together	**0.75**	0.09	0.10	0.26
(g) When with friends at home	**0.69**	0.01	0.27	0.27
(h) When getting together with friends after work before going home	**0.41**	0.19	0.34	0.39
(j) For adults attending a young child's birthday party at someone else's home	-0.02	**0.83**	0.00	0.33
(i) When going to drive a car	-0.08	**0.74**	0.06	0.50
(b) As a parent, spending time with small children	0.13	**0.71**	-0.11	0.42
(k) With friends in a public place (beach, park, street)	0.17	**0.49**	0.15	0.50
(f) For a couple of co-workers out for lunch (on a workday)	0.04	0.27	**0.39**	0.65
(e) At home, on a weekday night	0.23	0.17	**0.38**	0.58

Note: Factor loadings (pattern coefficients) are presented. h^2 = communality.

We have assigned the names *convivial*, *with caution* and *non-convivial* to the three factors, on the basis of commonalities in the situations with strongest loadings in each. Thus conviviality – "the quality of being friendly and making people feel happy and welcome" (Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary, 2011) -- predominated in the situations playing a leading role in the *convivial* factor. While Item h is relatively marginally loaded on the *convivial* factor, the factor analysis assigns it to that factor. Conviviality was also there in the situations leading in the second factor, but it is *with caution*, since sobriety is required in or around the situation. The situations predominating in the third and weakest factor are *non-convivial*, in that the situation can be read as involving no company (Item e) or as a matter of convenience rather than conviviality (Item i). Overall, the *convivial* factor explained the largest proportion of the variance (31%) in responses between different situations, followed by *with caution* (23%) and *non-convivial* (8%).

The mean score on how much drinking is all right (from the last column of Table 2) on the five situations loading most heavily on the *convivial* factor is 2.48 (between "enough to feel the effects" and "1 or 2 drinks"), while for the *with caution* factor it is 1.45 (between "1 or 2 drinks" and "no drinking").

Given that the questions were designed primarily to measure norms on collective drinking occasions, the third factor was relatively weak (at 0.8, below the 1.0 conventional cut-off of the Eigenvalue), so we have focused on the first two factors in exploring the relationships with characteristics of the respondents below.

Correlates of the convivial *and the* "with caution" *factors*

Using regression analysis, we explored first the relationship of the respondent's drinking patterns with answers on the *convivial* and *with caution* factors, and then their relationship with the demographic location of the factors in the population, with and without taking the respondent's drinking patterns into account. Table 4 shows results by the respondent's drinking patterns. Those who drink at all were significantly more likely to give the answers favouring drinking in both the *conviviality* situations and those emphasising *with caution*. Those who typically drink three or more drinks at a time are considerably more likely than those drinking less or not at all to show high scores on both dimensions, but particularly on the *conviviality* dimension. Much the same results are there for those drinking five or more drinks on an occasion, particularly if this occurs at least monthly. But note that even among heavier drinkers there is not unanimous approval of heavy drinking in these situations.

Table 4

Relationships of drinking patterns to the two drinking norm factors

	Convivial BV[a] β	*With caution* BV β
Typical number of drinks on an occasion		
Abstainer	0 (Ref)	0 (Ref)
<1-2 drinks	.338***	.193***
3-4 drinks	.730***	.384***
5+ drinks	.948***	.525***
Risky drinking (frequency 5+ drinks)		
Abstainer	0 (Ref)	0 (Ref)
Never/not in the last 12 months	.204***	.119***
<Monthly	.585***	.280***
At least monthly	.823***	.429***
At least weekly	.866***	.573***

Note: Regressions with respondent's drinking pattern predicting the "convivial" and "with caution' factors. [a]BV = bivariate.

Considering variations by demography (Table 5), men were somewhat more likely than women to give more drinking-involved answers to the *convivial* circumstances, and particularly to the *with caution* circumstances. Those living with a partner, whether or not also with children, were somewhat less likely to favour heavier drinking in *convivial*

circumstances. There was a big difference in the answers on *conviviality* by age group, with younger respondents more likely to have favoured drinking in convivial situations. But on *with caution* responses there was little difference by age group. Among respondents drinking five or more drinks more frequently (*risky drinking*), the difference on *conviviality* by age groups was much reduced. Considering employment status, the self-employed were more likely to give positive answers on drinking in *with caution* environments. There was little difference by educational level, with those who had completed high school but not a bachelor's degree somewhat more likely to support drinking in *convivial* situations. The demographic dimension showing the strongest difference on answers concerning drinking in both *conviviality* and *with caution* environments was family income, with higher answers on permissible amount of drinking from those with high household incomes.

Respondents with higher scores either on *risky drinking* (the frequency of drinking five or more drinks) or on typical number of drinks on an occasion were much more likely to approve heavier-drinking norms, particularly on the *convivial* situation dimension, but also on the *with caution* dimension. Adding one of these variables into the multiple regression had only a fairly modest effect on the patterns by demography.

Table 5

Multiple regressions predicting "conviviality" and "with caution" response dimensions

	Predicting *conviviality* β			**Predicting *with caution* β**		
	Demo-graphics	**+ Risky drinking**	**+ Typical per occasion**	**Demo-graphics**	**+ Risky drinking**	**+ Typical per occasion**
Gender						
Men (Ref.)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Women	-.038	.074***	.046*	-.118***	-.052***	-.074***
Age						
18-34 (Ref.)	0	0	0	0	0	0
35-64	-.176***	-.145***	-.161***	-.028	-.018	
65+	-.364***	-.288***	-.324***	-.058	-.022	-.034
Education						
< High school completion (Ref.)	0	0	0	0	0	0
High school +	.106*	.087*	.090*	.012	.000	.005
Bachelor degree +	.046	.084*	.079	-.012	.010	.005
Employment						
Any other (Ref.)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Self-employed	.071	-.002	.054	.112***	.071*	.103**
Paid employment	.051	.017	.034	.026	.009	.016
Household income						
<$45,000	0	0	0	0	0	0
$45-$64.999	.091	.069	.072	.058	.048	.052
$65-$99,999	.141**	.074	.081*	.090**	.052	.062
$100-$149,999	.287***	.186***	.213***	.193**	.138***	.159***
$150,000+	.381***	.219***	.267***	.236***	.151***	.182***
Income not reported	.094*	.063	.071	.068*	.051	.057*
Household composition						
Lives alone (Ref.)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not partnered, with children	-.055	-.033	-.060	-.058	-.046	-.060
Partnered, no children	-.090**	-.063	-.068*	-.044	-.029	-.032
Partnered, with children	-.137**	-.064	-.079*	-.089**	-.046	-.058*
Not partnered, no children	-.011	.027	-.010	-.038	-.017	-.035
Risky drinking						
Abstainer (Ref.)		0			0	
Never/not in year		.217***			.104***	
<Monthly		.516***			.241***	
1-3 x month		.743***			.368***	
Weekly+		.853***			.518***	
Typical number of drinks						
Abstainer (Ref.)			0			0
1-2 drinks			.316***			.160***
3-4 drinks			.657***			.321***
5+ drinks			.861***			.459***

Note: response dimensions with demographics only; demographics plus Risky drinking; and demographics plus Typical drinks per occasion

Discussion

Previous discussions of the situational norms on drinking have often been in terms of "wetter" and "dryer" situations (e.g., Room et al., 2019). The factor analysis in this study supports this distinction between the situations, while bringing out that the situations covered in the items are nearly all social situations where the drinking is inherent in, and symbolic of, the sociability of the occasion. The difference in the items that cluster in the *with caution* factor is that the description of the situation includes, along with the convivial drinking, a mention of a potential limiting factor in or succeeding the situation – a factor which limits the drinking. It is interesting to see, in Table 4, that there was more difference between heavier and lighter drinkers on positive responses to the unmixed *conviviality* situations than on the *with caution* situations.

Respondents were telling us their view of the situational norms on drinking from the perspective of their position in the society. The norms they reported presumably reflect their experiences in their daily routines, in terms of others' comments and actions, and were presumably influenced also by their own views. In a given society there are numerous social worlds of drinking, each of them brought together by a common interest or identification, whether in terms of a shared occupation or setting, activity or hobby, or social position (MacLean et al., 2021; Room et al., 2022). Different social worlds in a given society will differ in their drinking norms, with the drinking in heavier drinking social worlds often at specific times and places somewhat enclaved from others in the society (Room, 1975). This setting apart of social worlds of heavy drinking means that there is greater agreement between those with different drinking levels in a society on situational norms for situations in which no or little drinking is expected than concerning heavy drinking situations (Room et al., 2019).

The substantial differences between heavier and lighter drinkers on situational norms in Table 4 thus at least in part reflect the enclaving of heavy drinking – that it tends to occur in somewhat bounded social worlds. The enclaving is reflected also in the differences by age group and indicators of socio-economic status – education and income. It is interesting to see that the differences between the genders were much less, particularly and notably for the *conviviality* factor. With many respondents living with a partner of the other gender, they are less insulated from the other gender's social worlds than is true for other demographic divisions, and this might explain why the descriptions of situational drinking norms are closer together for the genders than for other demographic divisions.

The survey was taken in the aftermath of the advent of COVID-19, and this may have had some influence on respondents' answers. However, the overall patterning of results resembled results found in a previous Australian national survey prior to COVID-19 (Room et al., 2019). The low completion rates following the random sampling also limit the generalisability of the results.

Conclusion

This study is the first to have factor-analysed situational drinking norms, finding two main factors, which we have labelled *conviviality* norms favouring drinking in the situation, and *conviviality with caution* norms where the drinking needs to be limited to limit risks of harm. Drinking norms differ in a national population not only according to the situation but also for different social categories. Views on whether and how much drinking is appropriate in a situation are influenced not only by the pursuit of conviviality through drinking together, but also by factors in the situation requiring caution. Respondents' views on situational drinking norms cluster according to whether caution becomes a factor in the situation. Views also vary by age group and socioeconomic status, with younger and higher-status respondents having higher norms for convivial drinking, and better-off respondents having higher norms also for drinking in situations requiring caution.

Further research is needed on the interaction of alcohol policies with situational drinking norms. That the prospect of driving a car shifted a convivial drinking situation into the *with caution* category can be seen as a likely positive result of Australia's strong policies against drink-driving. This suggests the utility for public health of policies discouraging drinking prior to other situations where intoxication risks harms to public health.

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